

Noah's Arks

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Two U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD) Ready Reserve Force (RRF) ships, the *Cape Victory* and *Cape Vincent*, homeported in Beaumont, Texas, assumed the role of Noah's Arks for the emergency agencies of Jefferson County, Texas, as they weathered Hurricane Rita and her 14-foot storm surge.

Faced with potential force-five hurricane winds, devastating flooding, and highways across the region clogged by one of the largest mass evacuations in American history, Jefferson County officials were in a quandary.

If emergency-response personnel drove their most critical first-response vehicles to higher ground within range of where they would be most needed, they might still be damaged by severe winds. If they moved their fleets of police and fire trucks further inland where winds would be less strong, they might face miles of roads blocked by fallen trees and power lines, hampering response after the storm.

Early Thursday, September 22, MARAD officials and Beaumont Mayor Guy Goodson hatched a plan to use two MARAD RRF roll-on/roll-off (RO/RO) ships homeported at the Port of Beaumont as a refuge.

The word was passed at a Jefferson County disaster planning meeting and soon officials from half a dozen local cities looked forward to riding out the storm aboard the *Capes Victory* and *Vincent*.

"I'd much rather be aboard this ship than in that building the rest of the firemen are in," said Beaumont Fireman T.J. Thornton on the *Cape Vincent* referring to a tall downtown Beaumont office building where most of his colleagues had been evacuated. "This ship can generate its own power, the lights will be on, and they fed me a good meal tonight. When those guys in that building lose power, it's going to be cold and dark."

Many RRF ships like the *Cape Victory* and *Cape Vincent* are RO/RO ships with large hydraulic ramps that enable trucks, tanks, and other heavy-duty vehicles to be driven onto the ships and parked on decks that look like large steel parking garages.

As the first cloud bands of Hurricane Rita ominously loomed on the horizon, Beaumont city maintenance crews drove aboard the ships with all manner of street repair, water, utility, and debris clean-up vehicles. A couple local cities brought rental trucks reportedly containing important city hall records. The cities of Nederland, Groves, and Port Neches brought dozens of fire and rescue vehicles. The Jefferson



RRF crew "parking" emergency-response vehicles aboard the *Cape Vincent*.

Photo by Ralph J. Ortolano, Jr., USN (RC)

County Sheriff's Department and the Port of Beaumont Police arrived with dozens more vehicles and rescue boats on trailers. A few private emergency services also sought refuge on the *Cape Vincent* and *Cape Victory* for five ambulances and three fire trucks.

Port of Beaumont Police Officer Renee Utley brought 17 police dogs, and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department brought another six, including several cadaver sniffing dogs.

"When this is over, I'm going to cook you all a big barbeque," said Officer Utley with emotion to crew members and Maritime Administration staff aboard the *Cape Vincent*. "You all are really the greatest for helping us like this."

As word of the shipboard refuge spread, several news crews arrived to document the scene as fire and police vehicles lined the wharf with officers and firemen awaiting their turns to drive aboard.

As the winds picked up, swirls of dust stung the eyes of people waiting on the docks. The first drops of rain started to fall, and the leaves of the trees began to turn upwards.

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Department wheeled two police helicopters aboard for search and reconnaissance after the storm. As the winds approached 40 miles per hour, the captains of the two ships gave the order to pull up the ramps before the wind speed prevented them from doing so.

Soon afterward, the rain was pelting ever stronger and the first responders of Jefferson County sat safely aboard their steel versions of Noah's Arks. They were prepared to ride out the storm surge and wait for the storm to pass so they could drive off the ships and rescue the less fortunate.